ALSO BY GAYL JONES

FICTION

Corregidora (novel) (1975)
Eva's Man (novel) (1976)
White Rat (short stories) (1977)
The Healing (novel) (1998)
Mosquito (novel) (1999)
Palmares (novel) (2021)
The Birdcatcher (novel) (2022)

POETRY COLLECTIONS

Song for Anninho (1981)
The Hermit-Woman (1983)
Xarque and Other Poems (1985)
Song for Almeyda and Song for Anninho (2022)

OTHER WORKS

Chile Woman (play) (1974)
Liberating Voices: Oral Tradition in African American Literature (criticism) (1991)

BUTTER

NOVELLAS, STORIES, AND FRAGMENTS

GAYL JONES

Beacon Press
BOSTON

BEACON PRESS
Boston, Massachusetts
www.beacon.org

Beacon Press books
are published under the auspices of
the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations.

© 2023 by Gayl Jones

All rights reserved
Printed in the United States of America

26 25 24 23 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

This book is printed on acid-free paper that meets the uncoated paper
ANSI/NISO specifications for permanence as revised in 1992.

Text design and composition by Kim Arney

Excerpt from Don Steele's *Symbolism and Modernity* printed
here by permission of the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Jones, Gayl, author.
Title: Butter : novellas, stories, and fragments/ Gayl Jones.
Description: Boston : Beacon Press, [2023] | Summary: "A wide-ranging collection, including two novellas and ten stories exploring complex identities, from the acclaimed author of Corregidora, The Healing, and Palmares"—Provided by publisher.
Identifiers: LCCN 2022043207 (print) | LCCN 2022043208 (ebook) | ISBN 9780807030011 (cloth) | ISBN 9780807030028 (ebook)
Classification: LCC PS3560.O483 B87 2022 (print) | LCC PS3560.O483 (ebook) | DDC 813/.54—dc23/eng/20220913
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2022043207
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2022043208

CONTENTS

BUTTER: A novella 1

SOPHIA: A novella 63

SCREEN TEST: A fragment 95

A SPY STORY 99

GARLIC BREAD: A novella 103

THE COSTUME MAKER 113

WORKER: A fragment 121

MIRABEAU 125

JIGSAW SANDALS 131

SHUGER'S WIFE 139

THE FEMALE ANGEL 155

HORSE RACE: A fragment 159

BATHTUB GIN: A fragment 163

THE HISTORIAN, THE ACTRESS, AND THE PLAYWRIGHT 167

WORKER

A fragment

I'm always imagining what people think of me. In Tijuana, in Jalisco, it is the same. Always imagining what others think. Always imagining the thoughts of others. Do you find this an amusing game? Do you have your identity papers?

I'm not an ignorant person, though perhaps in this city I appear so. In my village, everyone called me a clever girl. Maybe the most clever girl in the village. Maybe too clever for my own good. When the young men picked wives, they didn't want clever girls, not girls too clever for their own good.

I should tell you something of the history of my village, how the women fought along with the men and how the women had to be clever to escape from slavery, just like the men, and that we should all be proud that although we are Mexicans we are descended from Africa, and we are proud that escaped African slaves founded our little village, our own little freedom town. Sometimes people don't have the least idea about that and are surprised when I tell them the story. I tell them I consider myself to be Mexican and African at the same time, not one any more or better than the other. Here's a photograph of me in my village.

People who work in this factory are poor but honest.

Some of the girls think I put on airs, but I don't. But in a city like this I don't have the least idea of who I am, and I don't pry into anybody's business. I keep to myself when I'm not working. Sometimes people look at me like I'm an idiot, but in my village I'm considered a clever girl. And with a point of view. In my village there are such wonderful colors. If I were a photographer, that's the image I'd like to capture. Familiar images to me, but maybe not so familiar to anyone else. It would give me peace of mind to photograph my village.

The boss orders me to do something. He looks at me with amusement. Some people say he tries to sleep with all the girls in the place, but he hasn't tried to sleep with me. And maybe it's not the truth at all. Maybe he's an honest fellow. But some people will stick to any story. He only orders me to do this and that and the other. He's not even the first boss. He's the second boss. I've seen him get some of the girls up against the wall in the corridors; I've seen that for myself, and I'm an honest person, but me he only looks at out of the corner of his eyes. Some girls he gives a quick kiss, but me he only squints at.

Some men in my village are more handsome and more clever and more honest than him.

The noise from the factory always keeps me from sleeping. I hear the noise in my dreams. I hear the noise when I'm awake. You ask me what I do in the factory? I glue plastic parts together. Nice, clean plastic parts.

Plastic parts of all kinds of things. I follow the instructions. You must glue everything together. When you go to work there, they teach you the process. Some pieces you can put together without gluing. They form tight bonds and tight seals. I work near the back of the shop.

Then I go to the cafeteria and eat the food that gives me indigestion. Sometimes I bring my own fruit and vegetables. Freeze-dried to nibble on. I mix the freeze-dried fruits and vegetables together, mix in a few nuts and seeds, and some

type of whole grain. I bring my own bagged food that doesn't give me indigestion. Sometimes I mix in coconut flakes. The boss told me once I looked like an Indian, a Hindu. He and the first boss are devising new methods to make the factory more efficient. But these new methods seem identical to the old ones. Sometimes I bring my own hard-boiled eggs and put them in baggies too. Their eggs taste like rubber.

I hear the second boss tell one of the girls she's like a magnet. But he's looking at me with impatience. He's trying to teach me the new efficient method, but it's just like the old one.

I hear him tell one of the girls he wants to take her to the nearest hotel, but she won't go with him. He calls her a very industrious girl, and very pretty, but he looks like he's still angry.

I think he's going to fire her, but he doesn't. That's only because he's not the first boss, and there's someone he has to answer to. The first boss seems to be an honest fellow, but I don't know the whole story.

In my dreams, I hear the noise and fuss of the factory workshop, and then I'm gluing plastics. And some hold together without glue. They form tight seals.

Some of the girls say their real dreams are across the border in another country.

I might return to my village where I'm considered a clever girl.

MIRABEAU

Call me pied piper woman. There I was reading the Lorca poem about the barren orange tree and the tower, and there she was with oranges painted on her leather satchel. And there I was riding on the Boston subway from Back Bay to Mass. Avenue. And so I saw this little girl, and I'm a candy-maker and it was easy. I always smell like chocolate and caramel and peppermint.

"What's your name?" she asked.

I said, "Mirabeau Auvergne, like the volcanoes."

"That's a nice leather satchel," I say.

"It's not leather," she replies. "It's vegan."

A little girl, seven years old maybe, carrying that vegan satchel and a picture book of kangaroos, and I'd just come back from them, the doctors, telling me I couldn't have kids. As barren as Lorca's orange tree.

And this little nappy red-haired little Black girl reminded me of me when I was seven and that satchel with oranges reminded me of Lorca.

And so I decided, then, I'd take her home with me.

We got off on Mass. Ave. and walked toward my brownstone.

Everything's unmatched. A green, blue, brown, and purple chair at the kitchen table.

The girl sits in the purple chair. Isn't purple the color of royalty?

I fix the girl a plate of chocolate chip cookies and a glass of milk.

While she eats I'm looking out the window at another brownstone. A bird leaps from the top of the building like a diver, free-falls, and, just before it lands, takes flight. Could that be a sport of birds?

I used to do upholstery work, sew cloth into hassocks and couches. I used to stuff pillows with feathers and paint the arms of chairs with protective enamel. Once I started to invent a chair my own self, to design a kangaroo chair where you could hide things. A place for hiding things. Maybe hide a kidnapped girl inside.

Now the girl's on the sofa napping and I'm daydreaming, watching imaginary birds lined up like divers on the cliffs of some South Pacific island, ready to play the free-falling game again, to see which can come within a splinter of the ground and then soar.

I'm reading Linda Dahl's *Stormy Weather*. The music and lives of a century of jazz women. Makes you wish you were one. Got some of the best lines, like pianist Billie Pierce—the other Billie—saying, "I don't know if it was rough or not, 'cause I was rough right along with it."

I was born in Boston, "Bean Town," but my parents are from New Orleans, and sometimes I tell folks I was born there too, that place that *Time* magazine once called "brooding and flamboyant, raucous and urbane, devout and dissolute." Stokely Carmichael said, "A guerrilla studies," but I'm not a guerrilla. I heard him talk once, a speech he gave, then afterwards went to the john to relieve myself—I'd been holding myself in the whole speech—and I discovered penciled on the stall, "A gorilla studies, but he's still a gorilla."

Who wouldn't want to be born in New Orleans, though? I've got the whole city running together in my veins, they say:

Cajun, Creole, German, Irish, Italian, African, Spanish, French. And I look like it. One great uncle, they tell me, used to ride the backs of alligators in a circus or carnival show. The alligators let him ride them too, like he was some sort of river god. But that was years later, after they got acquainted. At first it was all danger.

And they asked him how come he put his fool self in danger like that? And he says, "Why not?" He used to travel all over, riding the backs of alligators.

I never wore perfume until I was thirty. Every perfume I ever smelled, smelled like trouble, and I was allergic to it; it gave me migraines, or it was just my imagination. Then once when I was thirty, I opened a bottle of perfume that smelled like sunshine, fresh air, and song. I wasn't allergic to that, and it didn't give me migraines. And I started wearing that. And when I was standing on the street corner waiting for the bus to go to work, this man comes up to me and says that I looked melon-sweet—perhaps I smelled like melons?—and said how he'd like to kidnap me, and then the bus came and I got on. I ran up the stairs of the bus.

I don't know if the times were rough or not, because I was rough right along with them.

Maybe you've seen me at the store I work at, standing at the counter, folding long strings of licorice. The licorice looks like my hair, because I wear long braids. "Is that Medusa?" a little boy in a sailor suit asked once, when he came into the shop. "Hush, no," snorted his mother, embarrassed. Then she explained in an even tone, "No, dear, that's how they wear their hair. It's quite the rage."

They've got chocolate everything where I work.

Chocolate sculpture, they call it. They've got a chocolate version of Rodin's *The Kiss*. It was me who did that one. I should tell you I'm a pretty good chocolate sculptress. I can make anything from chocolate. The boss says I'm a damn good candymaker. A damn good chocolatier. But they only

want you to make what's been made; they don't want you to experiment too much. This girl comes in in a yellow Lee Cooper sweatshirt and jeans. The boy's in a plaid shirt and jeans, and together they pool their money and buy the chocolate sculpture of *The Kiss*.

I take the little girl to a sweatshirt store. Sweatshirts with all kinds of pictures and snappy statements and sayings. And the little girl spends about an hour examining sweatshirts, until she finds the one she wants: "If you liked Vietnam I, you'll love Vietnam II." I'm not sure what it means, but the little girl seems wise to it. She looks wiser than her years. And I'm thinking I don't know who's kidnapped whom.

A Chicago man came to New Orleans and spotted my great uncle riding alligators and wanted to take him around the world.

"This act's too big for Louisiana," he said. "This is a world-class act."

Then he came back later and showed my great uncle a drawing of himself on the back of a fussy crocodile.

Because the man couldn't tell the difference between a crocodile and an alligator, or whoever did the illustration for him couldn't tell the difference. Great uncle liked the picture of the crocodile, but not of himself. He said the illustrator had the crocodile looking more human than he did.

"Had the croc looking more like a human being than me."

The glasses have moons and flowers on them. The woman who owns the place is North African, Moroccan, but was born in Paris. Once she was in love with someone but didn't confess her love in time, and so he married another girl. In her spare time she grows roses and is readying one for the Salon International de la Rose. She wants to win the Prix des Nautes, or some sort of prize. I think that's the name of it. The prize allows her to get to name a rose.

She wears a peacock comb in her steel-gray hair and a dress with two splits up the sides and splashed with rainbows,

birds, and flowers. Older women are dressing like that nowadays, but in those days they didn't do much of that and that made her stand out. They used to tell women in those days to dress their age. Now they can dress like any age.

Les enfants, she would call all of us youngsters. *Les enfants*.

I knew you when you were knee-high to a grasshopper.

And then she'd ask us what we'd have for dinner. She was born in Paris, but it was in Boston that I met her. She had immigrated to the States and opened a tiny restaurant there. Afro-French. The tables were so close together.

Je t'ai connu quand tu étais jusqu'aux genoux d'une sauterelle.

The boss at the shop where I make chocolate, even chocolate angels, is a nervous little man. We call him Mr. Jack. He's nervous because he's got so many people to boss around. I used to think that bosses weren't nervous people, that they liked bossing people around and were all confident. In his office he eats his lunch very fast, and even then he's got chocolate makers interrupting him asking him, "Mr. Jack, what about such and such?" Every little thing seems to make him nervous. And he's very fastidious. If there are not enough paper doilies to put the chocolates on, he gets nervous. He's got a bookkeeper and someone who handles the inventory, but he's still nervous. He doesn't even make the chocolates himself, although people say he knows as much about chocolate making as anyone in the place, and he's still nervous. He's still a nervous fellow. If I was a boss, bossing folks about, I guess I'd be nervous all the time too.

In the newspaper I'm reading, there's a picture of the little girl I've kidnapped. I buy it to read on the subway going to work, and I read it again on the subway coming back. When I unlock the door, the little girl, wanting her freedom, has trashed the place. She's trashed the whole place. Everything. And now she's watching Grace Jones on my TV. I got old tapes of her.

So I don't say anything. I sit down to read a book about a poor Black sharecropper family with three daughters. Two ignorant daughters and one smart.

Except the two ignorant daughters, says the author of the book, "are ignorant because they ignore the things that other folks take for granted that one needs to know." That's not the exact quote, but it's as close as I remember it.

"Is this me? Is this me?" asks the little girl, holding up the newspaper.

I don't answer her right away. I wonder why she doesn't recognize herself. And then I'm thinking about once on the subway I saw two men hitting each other with rolled-up newspapers. An affectionate hitting, the kind two buddies give each other. Like someone said that that was the only way that men could show affection, some sort of emotion, anyway, was by popping each other every now and then. At least in the old days.

The girl is wearing her new sweatshirt when I take her to her door. They think I've found her and want to reward me.

"You found her! You found her!" they exclaim.

And the girl doesn't say I didn't find her. She doesn't give me away.

The little girl, she's beaming like sunshine, and me, I'm maybe a moon.

At work I sculpt a chocolate alligator and I sculpt a kangaroo. Mr. Jack says I need to put a baby kangaroo—what do you call them? he asks. A joey?—in my kangaroo's pouch. He keeps repeating what I need to put in its pouch. But me, I'm not so sure.

We could at least pay you for her new clothes.

No thank you, madame et monsieur.

JIGSAW SANDALS

It was 1938, before most folks had any thoughts of war, when I started working as a ticket taker at this local Black movie house. Not a fancy one. Not one of those palace types. It used to be a silent movie theater, then Mr. McElroy got his license, bought it, and started running talkies.

Mr. McElroy is one of those light-skinned colored men. Seems like you see plenty more of them down South than you do up North. I suppose it's because of the history of the South, the Southern story. Anyhow, people say the reason they gave Mr. McElroy his license is because they thought he was a white man. Still, there are others who say he really is a white man, just pretending to be colored. And there are folks like that, passing for colored, just like there are colored folks passing for white. I think I read a story like that somewhere, about who's passing for whom. That Langston Hughes story.

Anyhow, that week we were running an all-colored movie. They say all-Black today or all–African American, but in those days, and when I was a youngster, they said "all-colored." Sometimes they would say "all-Negro." It was called *The Killers*, I think. Not from the Ernest Hemingway story. This was a different *The Killers*. I think that was the name of it. It starred Lawrence Chenault and Willor Lee Guilford. I know some Chenaults and Guilfords in this town, but I don't

think they're any kin to those movie actors or have any movie stars in the family.

But you've probably heard of them, or if you haven't heard of them, you've probably seen them in the movies.

I first saw Willor Lee Guilford at the Palace Theatre in Louisville, Kentucky. They've got two Black theaters in Louisville. The Palace and the Funky Lumber. I don't know how they came by that name; the Funky Lumber, I mean. I've never been there to the Funky Lumber, but the Palace is really nice. And it does look kind of like a palace and a real tribute to movie culture. That was how they were constructing theaters in those days. That was the type of architecture, true palace-designed theaters.

Because the movie theater in those days was a fancy and fanciful thing. And people would dress up to go to the movies, unlike today.

The theater I was working in, though, wasn't a palace, like I said. But, as for me, I like to go into any movie theater and see the likes of Willor Lee Guilford on the screen and not just Paulette Goddard, Evelyn Brent, or Pola Negri, although I like Pola Negri. And ain't that a name for a woman? But I mean, women who look like us.

We also showed movies with Nina Mae McKinney and Mantan Moreland. Those all-colored-cast movies, that was my first time seeing so many of us on the movie screen and playing all kinds of roles and every type of role imaginable and playing the great roles, heroes and villains, gangsters and cops, cowboys and cowgirls, scientists and doctors even. Just use your imagination.

It was 1938, like I said, and I was twenty-one or just turned twenty-one. I was taking tickets and wearing those jigsaw sandals, you know, which were considered pretty darn stylish in those days, and being a youngster I could wear shoes like that. Nowadays, I have to wear shoes with a little more arch support in them.

As for me, I'm originally from Covington, Kentucky.

Actually, I'm from a little country town near Covington. But I was staying in Lexington, Kentucky, with my sister Alberta and her husband, Turk. Turk is from Zion's Hill, Kentucky, one of those original "freetowns" that the Blacks formed after they were emancipated. The free Blacks would form their own little towns, you know, like Warthumtown and Davistown and Little Davistown and Bracktown and a lot of towns throughout the South and out west. They live on Race Street, I mean in Lexington, my sister Alberta and her husband, Turk. When I first heard the name, I thought they were saying "Raise Street."

They don't live in one of those shotgun houses. You know, those shotgun houses. One of those straight-back little houses that they say you can shoot a shotgun through it and the bullet goes in the front door and out the back. No, they live in one of those duplexes with a family next door. Or maybe you could call it two shotgun houses tacked together. Except the rooms were kinda catercornered and not straight-back.

It's my sister Alberta who got me the job at the movie theater taking tickets. She took me right over to see the projector-man, not Mr. McElroy, because Mr. McElroy allowed the projector-man to hire the ticket takers; he didn't hire them himself. So the projector-man, Mr. Halbert, a big John Henry–looking man, took one look at me and said, "She'll do." I thought there'd be more to getting work than that. He didn't even ask me what my grades were in high school. He just said, "She'll do."

The projector-man is a tall, brown-skinned man, the color of candied yams, and looks like John Henry, like I said, or my imagination of that steel-driving man. He's no Sidney Poitier or the handsome fellows of your generation, though. And he don't ask for references or anything. Like I said, he don't ask how many grades I've been to. He knows Alberta and Turk, and he's looking at her like she's somebody he's

fond of and he just looks at me and says matter-of-factly, "She'll do."

"She's an honest young lady and a hard worker," says my sister.

But he ignores her comment and does ask me to say "Ticket, please."

I repeat it. "Ticket, please."

No, what I really say is, "T-t-t-ticket, please?"

"Does she stutter?" he asks Alberta.

"Naw, she doesn't stutter," says Alberta. "She's just nervous."

"Say it again," says the projector-man.

I say, "Ticket, pelase." This time I don't stutter. I just mispronounce the "please."

He doesn't comment. He just gives me another matter-of-fact look and then he says, "She'll do."

Then he says, "She'll look mighty pretty taking them tickets."

My sister Alberta says, "You don't hire a gal for pretty." She mutters something to herself that I don't hear.

The projector-man hires me anyway.

Before I went to get the job as the ticket taker, Alberta took me to this beauty parlor that's also on Race Street, because she told me it made me look too country with my hair not straightened, and I was in the city now, in one of the central cities, and a grown woman. Alberta was sitting reading *Liberty Magazine* while the woman doing my hair started talking about our country going to war.

"Us ain't going to war," said Alberta.

"Us going to war," said the hairdresser.

The hairdresser says she knows a woman who used to be a jazz singer in Berlin until Hitler sent all the jigaboo entertainers outta Germany. I hadn't heard the word "jigaboo" before and didn't know anyone from our part of the world

who'd been to Germany. But that hairdresser woman called every type of colored person jigaboo.

Colored Americans, Africans, Caribbeans, Asians and Indians and such. Everybody was a jigaboo who wasn't white. And even some of the whites she referred to as jigaboos.

At first she said that woman told her it was just a rumor that Hitler was going to send all the jigaboo entertainers out of Berlin. First he banned playing jazz on the radio and then the word came down that all the jigaboo entertainers were banished from Germany.

"She's in Switzerland now," said the hairdresser.

"How did y'all meet?" asked Alberta.

"She was passing through our town. Had an entertainment engagement at the Lyric and was looking for someone to do her hair and they sent for me. She said I did a fine job and sometimes we correspond. She wanted me to travel with her and do her hair on the road.

"But that's not the type of person I am. I've got my own shop and I prefer to be my own person."

As for me, I'd just come from a little country town near Covington, Kentucky, and here she was talking about Switzerland and such like places and how she turned down the opportunity to travel about the world with a famous entertainer.

Then she showed us a picture of this woman, her entertainer friend. I'm expecting some high-fancy type. A glamorous type beside a Duesenberg or one of those Mercedes-Benzes like you see in the picture books and magazines, but she shows us a little brown-skinned, sweet-faced woman standing beside a bicycle. And she's wearing knickers. Knickerbockers, I think they call them.

And she shows another picture of the woman standing beside a tall African, a Guyanese but born in London, she tells us. His eyes look like stars in his dark face. And then there's

another picture of them walking along a riverbank and there are birds in the sky behind them. I think they are lovers, but the hairdresser says those are publicity photos, and he's some kind of jazz instrumentalist who accompanies her entertainer friend when she sings.

And they both had to settle in another country, but neither wanted to return to the States.

"She still thinks I made a mistake staying in this country when I had the opportunity to see the world."

She greases my hair with a hairdressing with a nice fragrance like coconuts, and she's still talking about us going to war.

"We can't stay ostriches," she says.

After the beauty parlor is when Alberta takes me to town and buys me some jigsaw sandals and a new beige and yellow suit with padded shoulders, the kind in style in those days, the kind that Paulette Goddard used to wear. No, not a zoot suit. It was the men who wore the zoot suits and that was in forty-something, the Black and Latin men. You've heard about those zoot-suit wars?

When I came back from ticket taking, I could hear them, the couple in the duplex next door. Then I hear footsteps out the back door. No, it's not Turk and Alberta; I know it's the couple next door.

I had started to stay in that little country town, but it's Alberta who sent for me. I didn't come to the city just on my own. She started telling me about the new colored theater and that there might be a job for me there. She told me there wasn't anything for me in that little country town but to work in some white folks' kitchen. I told her that there were plenty of white folks' kitchens in Lexington to work in. But she told me they were hiring at a new Black theater in town, a new colored theater.

Alberta and Turk both have factory jobs, working in a tobacco factory. They both work on the line. I don't know

what working on the line means. But Alberta says they both work on the line. And they have also worked in the fields, stripping tobacco. But they prefer to work on the line. She didn't want me to work there, though, because she says I'm a more delicate person.

Now I'm sitting here waiting while Alberta is having her hair done. I'm reading *Liberty Magazine*, reading about Andy Hardy and Freddie Bartholomew and the adventures of the Notorious Sophie Lang.

"Us going to war," says the hairdresser.

"No us ain't," insists my sister Alberta.

SHUGER'S WIFE

1.

I've darkened in the Caribbean sun and now I'm the color of polished mahogany and like in Walter Roberts's poem "I ride the white sea horses onto the beach," and it's good to charge from the ocean, into the leaning palms, and to laugh into the sun.

My husband's brought me here to the Caribbean, to an island that the tourists haven't discovered yet, and so I won't give you its name. Even in postcards, I don't name it, and the postcards are always posted from the mainland.

Those who have known me on other islands might say that here I've begun to glow.

We've rented a small house that's separated from the sea by a forest. It's curious that my husband's chosen such a house, but he insists that it's the only rentable house, and anyway, he says, it's not separated from the sea by a true forest but only an accumulation of trees. If you knew him, you wouldn't be surprised by his vocabulary. Mine is more simple and straightforward. I know a forest when I see one. And I know the forest from the trees.

I've come to the seaside. I, like all the others, cannot deny the sea. Another poet said so. Perhaps it was Lamming who

said you remember it, always. Anyway, a true poet said so. It must have been Lamming. Even a stranger here, even those from lands without seashores, or even rivers, are drawn to the sea. If I were a poet, I'd hunt for metaphors, or symbolism, but the sea seems to be its own metaphor, its own symbolism.

I take a book with me, one that my husband presented me with: Don Steele's *Symbolism and Modernity*. It is written in the sort of language my husband uses. There is an essay on Hesse's "Der Dichter." I must get my husband to translate the German. He says the author has written other books, not just aesthetics.

There is one on the economic philosophy of Malcolm X and another . . . "I must get you the other books . . . The true meaning . . ." he starts to say, then he quotes from one of the essays:

> The symbolists believed like ancient magicians that words possessed a power to control nature. Each natural force had a secret word to which it was enslaved, and the possessor of the word could control that force, like "abracadabra." Theoretically, one could by mere words control the planets and stars. Poetry was viewed at the apex of words. The poet was the seer, the high priest, capable with his musical chants of bringing down the mountains. Whether any poet, priest or magician has ever accomplished anything resembling such a structure of words to perform miraculous feats is for us here moot.
>
> What is indisputable, however, is that words do have a powerful effect on human emotions and in history. Words can produce sublimity, laughter, cheers, smiles and love. Or, words can produce pain, fear, hatred, melancholy and death. Words can transcend time and picture life thousands of years ago. Words can transform space and picture life on the other side of earth from where one stands.

A sea turtle, on the white sand, near my feet, is in its shell, dreaming.

I daydream.

2.

One can be as corrupted by islands as anything. "If I'm set on getting islands, others are set on worse," says Sancho. My favorite author used to be Cervantes, and I wasn't content to read him in translation. I insisted on learning the original, uncorrupted Spanish.

As for me, perhaps it's only the paradises that corrupt, or what we presume to be the paradises. I'm not set on getting islands, really. If you're born on islands like these, they say, you see the island differently, you view it differently. Islanders, they say, want to escape the island to the mainland. Is the mainland, then, their paradise? If I were born here, perhaps the sea would not amaze and entice me. I wouldn't paint it or try to get its true tones. I wouldn't gather scavenger objects from the beaches to form into sculptures.

3.

In the evening, Sugar and I—sometimes I call him Sugar, not Shuger—are getting dressed to meet friends at a local pub. They call them pubs here. One friend's a movie extra and the other's a poet. Not a poet I've read. But my husband seems to know all the writers I've never read. He doesn't know them all personally. He collects their books. In the bar—I prefer to call it a bar—I drink warm beer. The movie extra, who's never had a speaking part and insists she doesn't want one, insists she prefers being an extra, is silent. But the poet is very talkative. He asks me, "How does one state the whole truth and remain poetic?" At first I think he's speaking to my husband, because it's a question for my husband, not for me.

I don't answer. I pretend I'm a movie extra. I sip the warm beer and watch a few early lovers dance. I hum to the music, but I'm somewhere behind the beat.

Perhaps it's a rhetorical question. Perhaps I'm not expected to answer.

"Were you born on this island?" I ask him finally.

"No, not this one. But another one. One quite like it. One very much the same."

"I've been to Cat Island," I say.

"Yes, Shuger told me you trekked there."

And then he quotes me from one of his own poems.

Something between the empire and home, in an unpoetical time. I suppose to everyone, their age and time seem unpoetical. The more you learn of history. The more you know.

I listen, but I'm unsure of the rhythms of this place. I'm either behind the beat or ahead of it. I can tell that he's as preoccupied with metaphors as my husband, Shuger (that's his last name; he says it was originally spelled Shuyger, but an ancestor changed the spelling; I don't know if that's true ancestral history). Anyway, Shuger pours more beer for me from an orange pitcher, holding the pitcher by only one of its ears.

"Anyway, here's the book I told you about," says my husband, and hands him a copy of Kambon Obayani's *Island of Song*.

My husband likes to present books as gifts. That's his favorite type of gifting. His first gift to me was a book. An autographed copy of a book by Gwendolyn Brooks.

I want to ask this poet whether he too has seen the white sea horses, but I don't. The moon peeks through the window at us. We stay in the pub till the birds wake up and the sun rises out of a cavern of stars.

4.

Walking back on the beach in the sand, I ask whether the hoofprints I see are the hoofprints of mules.

"They're the hoofprints of memory," says the poet.

Then he chants:

Listen to the grass, the ping-pong drums,
The wul'

The movie extra is silent and Shuger is holding me by the waist.

"Wul'?" I whisper.

"World," he says. "That's how my people pronounce 'world.'"

I say nothing. I think of Margaret Walker Alexander's *For My People*. I see a sea turtle and wonder if it's the same one I saw early in the day. Now it's not sleeping but rushing seaward, as turtles rush, scrambling the sand.

Shuger and I enter what I insist is a forest, while the others continue up the beach.

Although Shug is scientifically minded, he collects the poetry of Black men, their writings in general really, from all across the diaspora; some I've heard of, some names I don't know. Fiction, poetry, memoir, essays, all types, you name it. He says that as a Black boy growing up in Minnesota, he felt like an "endangered species"; then his father gave him a copy of Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, the first book he fell in love with, and as he grew older he kept discovering others, from the old school to the new school. He has almost everybody in his collection, names I know and don't know. James Alan McPherson, Ishmael Reed, Michael S. Harper, Clarence Major, Kambon Obayani, John Wideman, Robert Fleming, Jupiter Hammon, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, Chester Himes, Sterling Brown, Ernest Gaines, Amos Tutuola, Amiri Baraka, Walter Mosley, Claude McKay, Henry Dumas, Samuel R. Delany, Martin Delany, Olaudah Equiano, Ronald Fair, Rudolph Fisher, Leon Forrest, Sam Greenlee, John A. Williams, George Moses Horton, George Schuyler, Albert Murray, Don

Steele, J. A. Rogers, Robert Hayden, Haki Madhubuti, Dudley Randall, Eric Walrond, Henry Van Dyke, Malcolm X . . . among many others . . .

He even has unpublished manuscripts by every type of Black man, including some incarcerated men, who found out by some means of his collection of books by Black men and sent him copies of their books and manuscripts, fiction, memoirs, poetry, and plays.

In fact, his collection of books and broadsides and manuscripts by Black men authors takes up our whole library at our home in Detroit and even the hallways. I keep my women authors' books in the attic, which I have turned into a library. Once my husband came up to the attic and thought he would be entering a space "for colored girls only," and then discovered that I had books by women of every color, race, creed, and nationality. He started fingering some of the books. I peeked up from my peacock chair and my own reading to glimpse who he was looking at: Carlene Hatcher Polite, Marguerite Duras, Ruby Zagoren, Margaret Randall, Joan Didion, Isabel Allende, Ann duCille, and a few others.

"What's this one about?" he asked.

"It's about a modern-day Black female picara—she's from the lower classes but moves about among people of different levels of society and different races and nationalities. She also sort of got the idea from James Joyce's HCE."

"Say what?"

"You know, 'Here Comes Everybody.' Joyce's expression in one of his books. She was a fan of James Joyce, and even took a course on Joyce when she was in college from the widow of Randall Jarrell, the famous poet."

"Say who?"

"Randall Jarrell. Well, anyway the woman, the lead character, in the book's a bit of a rogue, you know, like the old picaros and picaras of the Spanish tradition."

"Who's Kelly Brown?" he asks, picking up another book.

"That's the title of the book, not the author."

"The woman on the cover is blue."

"She's supposed to be biracial, a woman born of an interracial affair in Kentucky in the old days when interracial relationships were against the law, you know, and then she likewise marries outside of her race. The book's about her adventures and misadventures . . ."

"So it says," he says, looking at the blurb on the back. "And who's Ruby Zogaren?"

"Zagoren. Her book is called *Venture for Freedom*; it's a slave-narrative novel, but she's a Jewish woman."

I know he noticed the book because there's a Black man on the cover. The subtitle is "The True Story of an African Yankee."

He opens the book and starts reading sections aloud:

"'When first plunging into the research necessary for writing *Venture for Freedom*, I did not realize how many individuals would help in the unremitting search for historical facts. My husband . . . '" Then he plunges into the book: "'In the forest of Guinea in West Africa, near a small village, a boy was tracking lion spore . . . '"

"Venture Smith was a real person," I comment.

"I know. That's what it says here. She's got a different last name from her husband."

"I know. I met her daughter when I was visiting a friend at Connecticut College. She's the one who gave me a copy of the book; I mean the friend. We were all sitting at the Black table, you know how we did in those days, and this white girl came up and sat down, and people didn't seem to notice her presence except for me. There was another white-looking girl at the table who turned out to be Black, so I wasn't sure what this one's identity was either. Both had Jewish last names. And then my friend introduced her, and when we got back to her

dorm room she gave me a copy of Ms. Zagoren's book and also a copy of a poem by her daughter that had been published in *The Nation* when she was still a schoolgirl."

He puts the book down and picks up another, by a Latina.

"I met her at Connecticut College also. She's from the Dominican Republic. She was still a young girl. She and my friend were both students of June Jordan, you know, the Black woman poet, who was filling in for a poet named William Meredith when he was on sabbatical, I think. You know, they were just beginning to hire Black professors. Some of those colored girls had never had Black professors before. Unlike myself. Anyway, I met a lot of writers when I was a student, writers and future writers of every type and description. I met more writers than I did artists. You introduced me to Dudley Randall, who founded Broadside Press. You remember."

"Of course. You adore writers more than artists anyway. You don't have to compete with them."

"You were telling him about that prisoner who had sent you some of his writings. And then you were thinking of following Mr. Randall's lead and setting up your own publishing company to publish all those manuscripts you were collecting. You wanted his advice. He seemed like a good sort. I mean, Mr. Randall. I liked him."

"And who's Zona Gale?"

I tell him.

"Who's Carlene Hatcher Polite?"

"That's Toni Morrison's cousin, someone told me. I was sitting on this wall at grad school outside the dorm reading Toni Morrison, and someone walked by and tossed up to me a copy of a book by Carlene Hatcher Polite, and said she was Toni Morrison's cousin. I didn't know if she was signifying or meaning her real honest-to-goodness cousin. It's a very experimental type book. I read them both. I think even you'd like Carlene Hatcher Polite."

"I like her name." He thumbs through the other book. "This picara sounds a bit like you."

I say nothing.

"'Here Comes Everybody' is right. They should call you HCE. And you're a bit of a rogue yourself. You've got every imaginable female up here. It's a bit crowded, don't you think? I notice you don't have any artwork by women artists, not even your own."

Then he stands among Native American female authors and fingers my dream catcher.

"So this is your dream catcher."

Then he's among the Latinas again. Then he lifts up a book by Mary Barber and stands among the Irish female writers.

"I guess I never really thought about Irish women writers. I didn't know there were so many Irish female writers. I know all the men of course. I think I read Mary McCarthy, but she's Irish American, isn't she?"

He goes among the "colored girls" again and picks up Alice Walker's *In Love and Trouble.*

"That's the first Alice Walker book I ever read," I said. "She came to our school and gave a reading. She was supposed to give a lecture but forgot her notes, and so gave a reading instead. She read from that book. My professor introduced us. She thought I was a writer, a poet maybe. Alice Walker, I mean. But I told her I was an art student. But I was taking courses in African American literature from this professor, and some of us students were introduced to her."

He muses a moment, replaces *In Love and Trouble,* then gives me some papers to sign, why he came up to the attic in the first place. Some sort of new homeowner's insurance policy form that we both had to sign.

Then he's drawn to another book with a Black man on the cover.

"Who's this?"

"He's supposed to be a private detective, part African American and part Russian. A sort of satire on the detective genre. There are a series of stories. That's the same author who wrote *Kelly Brown*. And that's some science fiction. I guess they call it Afrofuturism now. That section is all her books. When she wrote that it was the 1950s, though. Her real first name is Electra, but they used to tease her when she was a child and call her Electricity. So she started using her second name as her first name. Her father's Hawaiian. Spanish and Hawaiian. Her mother's African American and Irish. That's a childhood memoir over there and there's a family history.

"Her grandfather founded one of those little freetowns.

"That one was called Warthumtown. It wasn't just an all-Black town, though. They had some white people and some Mexicans and some Native American families too. But it was owned by Blacks, a free Black founded the town."

"You've got a whole section."

"Yah. Those are the indie authors over there. I've got whole sections on them. And I've got my own collection of manuscripts too."

"It's really tight up here. You're really crowded."

"It's my cocoon."

"What about the movie extra? Has she never had a speaking part?" I'm asking now. "When you called her your friend, I thought it was going to be a man. Are she and the poet lovers?"

"No, they had just met that night."

"They could still be lovers."

"No, she's never had a speaking role. But there's not a movie set in the Caribbean that I haven't seen her in. She loves playing extras in Caribbean scenes, and they love to have her. I think she was even in a James Bond movie as a little girl, somewhere in the background."

I try to remember what movies set in the Caribbean that I've seen her in. I try to remember James Bond. I try to remember a little girl or a grown woman. Carrying a tray of seafood? Dancing on a table or the beach? Lounging in the sand? Riding the white sea horses up from the sea? She has one of those familiar faces. An everywoman's face.

"And the poet? Tell me one of his poems."

Shuger recites:

Change confirms the truth of change
In an exotic setting
Where love is many colored

And then he recites more poems. He has one of those sorts of memories, both auditory and photographic. Poems of moons, stars, boats, sea turtles, the sea itself, caverns, awakened birds, more stars, silence, ecstasy and dreams, and here and there are cocoa beans, mango, and bamboo.

5.

Inside the forest house, Shuger and I make love.

From the open window, the moon's so bright. I nest against him like a sea turtle and wonder if the ocean ever sleeps. In a dream, I play a movie extra, but it's an old silent movie.

When I'm half awake, the sun strides through the window shouting up up up get up! I shower in a wooden shower stall, but I'd expected a cruder, older one. Nothing so modern. I can smell the lavender from the shaving soap.

"Are they lovers?" I insist.

"No, they're married."

"So you lied when you said they'd just met."

"It's a private joke."

"That's no joking matter."

"He says whenever he's with her, it's always like he's meeting her for the first time. She almost never speaks. I've almost never heard a peep from her. It's like she's a movie extra in her own life too."

"Have they been married for a long time?"

"Rather long."

"Maybe they know each other too well. Do they have kids?"

"Several."

"Aha!"

I wash my hair. I imagine their children as little movie extras, running about or riding seahorses. But he says their kids are grown-ups now. Grown children. Not little ones.

6.

From the window, I see Shuger, dressed and walking through the forest toward the beach. He's carrying one of his books. *Island of Song? Symbolism and Modernity? Images of Kin?* The odor of aftershave mixed with peppermint toothpaste lingers. I arrive on the beach with buttered rolls and melons.

After breakfast, the two of us walk the shoreline. Out to sea are fishermen in tiny bamboo-colored boats. Some drag in nets; others hold poles or harpoons. Real harpoons. Not Raymond Barrow's harpoons of light. I've never seen real harpoons before, not even from a distance.

There used to be pirates all along these coasts, says Shuger. I mishear him.

It sounds like he said, "There used to be pirates all along these coats." Then I hear him right.

"Oh, yeah? Suppose there are now? I saw this news story about modern-day pirates. Drug smugglers."

"I suppose," he says, matter-of-factly. "But this isn't the Bahamas."

I picture Shuger and me as two pirates. Not modern-day pirates, but pirates of the old days.

Buccaneers. The fishermen look so small in the ocean. But we, Shuger and I, must look equally small to them. Or perhaps smaller.

He sits on the sand, opens a book, and begins to read.

7.

At the edge of the beach, a woman is breaking stones. The dress she wears is cactus green; sunlight dances on her hammer.

"Why is she breaking stones?" I ask Shuger.

Shug doesn't answer right away, as if he's pondering the question, or thinks I'm ignorant for asking.

"All she does all day is break stones," he says finally. "It earns her a living."

He returns to reading.

I picture her from sunset to sunrise, breaking stones. I picture a whole island of stone breakers. Men, women, children. They get up early to go break stones.

The wind ruffles my hair. I hand him a melon. We eat juicy melons. I watch the woman break stones. I'm so thirsty I could swallow the whole ocean.

"Maybe she won't sell them," I muse. "Maybe she'll just use them to build her own cottage."

"She'll sell them," he says. "The masons buy from her."

That's how they

Turn stones into bread

8.

I sit on the sand and listen to the rhythm of the stone breaker. I don't dare speak to her. Although we're the same color, she knows I'm not of this island. I tell myself I don't speak because I don't want to break the rhythm of her stone breaking. Shug has returned to the forest house, but I stay to listen to the woman breaking stones and to watch the seahorses rise higher and the men in their boats rise with them. I watch the sea turtle. Is it still the same one?

Shug has told me about them, the sea turtles. They come to lay their eggs in the sand. They lay their eggs in a shallow layer of sand, and so the eggs are ripe for predators.

"Why don't they lay them in deeper sand?" I asked.

"Because the eggs are too fragile for deeper sand," he answered.

And when the tiny turtles are born, they make their way toward the sea. If the seabirds don't get them. If the seabirds don't get them, they return to the sea.

"Would you rather be a seabird or a tortoise?" I asked.

"It's not a tortoise; it's a turtle," he replied. "They're not the same."

"What's the difference?" I asked.

"The tortoise is strictly a land dweller."

"And the other one, does the other one dwell strictly at sea?"

He didn't reply. Then he said the word "terrapin." Then he talks of tortoises, the giant ones of the Galapagos Islands.

Now I watch the sea turtle scoop out a nest of sand. And then it covers its nest with the thinnest layer of sand. Then it turns seaward. When it reaches the sea, it climbs a white seahorse and rides further out.

I, on shore, watch a seabird land near the turtle's nest. It takes flight as I rise. One fisherman moves inland from the sea, and I climb through sand.

I lift a seashell that has found its way into the forest.

I think of Lamming's sea and then Collymore's.

Caribbean poets form a book that Shuger gave me before we came to this island.

9.

I'm on the beach again, watching the woman break stones. I light a cigarette.

"Give me one," she says.

I rise and give her the whole package.

"Not the whole package, my dear. Just one," she says, as if she's scolding me. She takes one cigarette and returns the package.

"Are you drawing me?" she asks. I show her my sketchbook.

"That's me all right," she says. "You must be very clever to draw so fast. A lot of artists come here. On holiday. But they don't draw so fast. They take their time."

I think she's going to say something else, but she doesn't. She goes on breaking stones.

I close my sketchbook as she poses her hammer over a stone.

"You Shuger's wife, aren't you?" she asks.

I wonder how she knows him and not me. I nod and wait for her to explain how she knows him, but she doesn't. She goes on breaking stones.

10.

I move forward, toward the edge of the sea, trying not to disturb the shallow turtles' nests.

I toss the butt end of my cigarette into the ocean and watch it float in a nest of seaweed. I think it's against the law to toss cigarettes into the sea, but I do so anyway.

Roguish me.

11.

In the pub I sip warm beer.

I ask my husband how the stone breaker knows his name.

"Because I told her. She asked me and I told her."

"Were you chatting her up?"

He ignores me.

"She thought I was a native of the islands. She knew you weren't. But she thought I was."

I finish the beer, and we go swimming in the starlight. We ride the white sea horses. We charge from the ocean into the leaning palms.

Back in the rented house, I dream of a woman somewhere breaking stones.

"I didn't know that people still said 'native,'" I whisper. "Not in this modern day and age."

THE FEMALE ANGEL

The female angel walked across the Seine

—ROMARE BEARDEN

I am the angel that Romare Bearden—or, I should say, I am the female angel that Romare Bearden once claimed he saw in Paris. It must've been around 1950, although this is a purely human conception of time and space. It might have been the Middle Ages in Spain or India, or the time of the Pharaohs in Egypt. It might have been when Kush was an African empire, or the time of the Ethiopian kings. It might have been the time of the Neanderthals or the Cro-Magnons. Perhaps I stood next to a cave artist in Europe, or with Huang-ti of China. Perhaps I was there at the time of Hammurabi's laws. I have known Chinese scholars and Jewish prophets. Was I not there when the Buddha was born, or Confucius? Did Meng-tse the philosopher know me? And what of Asoka of India or Hannibal the Great? Did Cicero know me, or Augustine? What of Attila and Muhammad? Genghis Khan? Kublai Khan? Was I not there when Ignatius of Loyola founded the Society of Jesus? And what of Jesus Himself? Did not Toussaint Louverture know me when he led his revolt, and what of Simón Bolívar? And Jose de San Martin? Did not Gandhi know me? And Jawaharlal Nehru? Did Malcolm ever know me? Or Mandela? Or perhaps I am only the